GAO

Briefing Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Federal Services, Post Office and Civil Service, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

January 1992

# FEDERAL RECRUITING

College Placement
Officials' Views of the
Government's Campus
Outreach Efforts





#### **General Government Division**

B-243207

January 31, 1992

The Honorable David Pryor
Chairman, Subcommittee on
Federal Services, Post
Office and Civil Service
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In a January 24, 1992, meeting with Subcommittee representatives, we discussed the results of a survey we had made of federal agencies' recruiting activities at selected colleges and universities. As requested, this report summarizes the information provided at the briefing.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Over the past several years, considerable attention has been focused on the inability of federal agencies to compete with private firms in attracting the Nation's most talented college graduates. Studies by our office, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and other organizations have pointed to the lack of aggressive campus recruitment as one cause of the government's hiring difficulties.

Campus recruitment can be a cost effective hiring tool as it allows organizations to meet and screen large numbers of college-educated career seekers in a single visit. Moreover, campus recruitment gives students the opportunity to obtain job information directly from prospective employers, thereby better helping students to decide where they might like to work.

In August 1990, we reported the results of group interviews we held in 1989 with students at 5 universities to obtain their views about federal employment. Many of these students told us they had limited information on federal career opportunities, and, when asked about the recruiting techniques they thought

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>See Federal Recruiting and Hiring: Making Government

Jobs Attractive to Prospective Employees (GAO/GGD-90-105,

Aug. 1990).

Surprisingly, nearly a third of the placement officials we surveyed said they had not heard of the Administrative Careers With America (ACWA) examinations even though OPM had been offering them since June 1990. These examinations are a means the government uses to fill its entry-level professional and administrative jobs. Positions covered by ACWA require at least a college degree or equivalent experience.

Our findings are described in greater detail in appendix I.

#### OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

The objectives of this study were to get an indication of the level and perceived quality of federal campus recruiting activities and to compare federal recruiting activities with those of nonfederal employers. To do this, we administered a telephone survey to placement officials at 40 randomly selected colleges and universities.

The 40 schools were chosen from the National Center for Educational Statistics' listing of colleges and universities offering 4-year bachelor's degrees or higher. This listing contained information on approximately 2,500 institutions. Before selecting our sample, we deleted schools that offered restricted curricula, such as music or art.

The sample was too small for the survey results to be generalized beyond the 40 schools. Nevertheless, the 40 schools represent a broad range of the Nation's institutions of higher learning. They included large and small public and private schools with a combined enrollment of over 630,000 undergraduates. Several had substantial minority populations. They varied in terms of their admissions selectivity but, as rated in the 1991 edition of Peterson's Guide to 4 Year Colleges, they had an average rating of "moderately difficult." (See app. II for a listing of the 40 schools.)

We questioned the placement officials (all of whom were directors or assistant directors) about student interest in federal careers, the frequency of federal campus visits, and the effectiveness of recruiting material agencies provided. (See app. III for a copy of the questionnaire.) All 40 officials participated in the survey.

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APPENDIX I APPENDIX I

PLACEMENT OFFICIALS REPORTED
GRADUATING SENIORS ARE INTERESTED
IN MEETING FEDERAL RECRUITERS

Thirty-five respondents indicated that graduating seniors were either very or generally interested in meeting with federal recruiters (see fig. I.1). However, five of these 35 placement officials added that some students were interested in only certain agencies. Three placement officials said they thought the recession had helped increase student interest in federal employment.

#### MOST PLACEMENT OFFICIALS FOUND FEDERAL RECRUITING MATERIALS EFFECTIVE

As shown in figure I.2, 24 placement officials said the recruitment materials OPM or other federal agencies provided to their schools were either generally or very effective. However, nine officials indicated that the materials were either generally or very ineffective. The other seven said the materials were neither effective nor ineffective or were not sure.

Some of the placement officials complained that the materials were confusing, contained bureaucratic language, and did not help users understand the hiring process. As one placement official commented:

"Although OPM has been making some efforts toward providing better, more timely information, the written materials which are provided to us are still difficult for students (or career advisers, for that matter) to comprehend. They are filled with 'federal-ese,' which may be comprehensible to people in the system, but are not easily understood by the uninitiated."

Another placement official explained:

"Recruitment materials provided by individual agencies are usually very effective. OPM material is just too broad and vague to be of use."

MOST PLACEMENT OFFICIALS
PERCEIVED LITTLE CHANGE IN
THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FEDERAL
RECRUITING MATERIALS

As shown in figure I.3, 25 placement officials told us they saw little change in the effectiveness of federal recruiting materials between the 1989-90 and 1990-91 academic years. Nine placement officials said the materials were more effective, while two believed they were less effective. Four officials were not sure.

CAMPUS RECRUITING IS USED EXTENSIVELY BY LARGE PRIVATE COMPANIES

In a separate survey, we obtained information on the employment practices followed by large private companies. The survey covered companies that each employed at least 25,000 people and had at least 100 employees in each of 10 or more locations. Of 130 companies meeting these criteria, 83 responded to our survey questionnaire.

The questionnaire listed eight possible recruiting methods for attracting new employees for professional jobs and asked the companies to indicate the extent to which they used each of the methods. Campus visits was the dominant recruitment method reported. Of those companies responding, 52 reported using campus visits to a very great or great extent. Newspaper advertisements and employee referrals—the next most frequently used methods—were used by 36 and 26 respondents, respectively. (See fig. I.4.)

<sup>1</sup> Workforce Issues: Employment Practices in Selected Large Private Companies (GAO/GGD-91-47, March 13, 1991).

APPENDIX I APPENDIX I

PLACEMENT OFFICIALS OFTEN REPORTED FEWER AGENCY VISITS TO THEIR SCHOOLS

Our survey showed federal agencies had not stepped up their recruiting activities in the 1990-91 academic year, compared to 1989-90. As shown in figure I.5, 21 placement officials said the number of agency visits to their schools was about the same in each of the 2 years.<sup>2</sup> Five placement officials reported that federal agencies had made more visits to their schools in 1990-91, but 13 reported fewer agency visits. One was not sure about the comparative number of visits in the 2 years.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Agencies may also recruit at specific academic departments for certain occupations; however, we did not obtain data on those visits.

APPENDIX I APPENDIX I

### Many Placement Officials Were Unfamiliar With ACWA Exams

Although a majority of the placement officials we surveyed said they were familiar with the requirement that students interested in administrative and professional positions usually had to take Administrative Careers with America (ACWA) examinations, a significant number were not. As shown in figure I.6, 27 placement officials had heard or read about the ACWA examinations; however, 12 said they had not heard or read about ACWA and 1 was unsure.

This lack of information on ACWA is troubling because the ACWA exams began in June 1990 and OPM says it has been actively promoting the program. If 12 of the 40 placement officials in our survey had not heard of ACWA, it could indicate the OPM marketing program needs greater coverage.

In discussing this matter with OPM officials, we were told that information on the ACWA exams was sent to every college and university in the country. They gave two possible explanations for the placement officials' lack of familiarity with the ACWA exams. According to OPM, there is a high turnover rate among placement officials, and those we surveyed may not have been in their jobs when the ACWA material was received. Also, the OPM officials said the material may have been routed to lower level placement counselors rather than the placement directors and assistant directors we surveyed.

## Many Placement Offices Lacked Adequate Information on ACWA Exams

As shown in figure I.7, of the 27 respondents who said they had heard or read about the ACWA exams, 8 respondents said their placement offices had little or no information on ACWA, 5 said their offices had some information, and 1 was unsure. Thirteen respondents told us their offices had a great or moderate amount of information on ACWA.

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## MINORITY OF FEDERAL AGENCIES MADE MOST OF THE RECRUITING VISITS

Of the 40 schools in our sample, 35 provided the names of employers that made recruiting visits during the 1990-91 academic year.

The 35 schools were visited by 111 different federal agencies. Of those agencies, 46 percent were from the Department of Defense. The Navy did the most recruiting at the 35 schools; Navy organizations accounted for 25 percent of all agencies making recruiting visits. Nevertheless, most of the Navy organizations visited just one or two of the schools.

As shown in table I.1, a small number of agencies were responsible for much of the campus recruiting. Seventeen agencies (15 percent) made about half of all campus visits, each going to 7 or more schools.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>For our purposes, multiple visits to a campus (e.g., fall and spring) were counted as a single recruiting visit.

PRIVATE COMPANIES DID MORE
CAMPUS RECRUITING THAN
FEDERAL AGENCIES

Relative to its size and the number of people it employs, the federal government had a limited campus presence at the 35 schools that provided us with data on employer visits.

The Internal Revenue Service and Central Intelligence Agency had the most active campus recruiting programs, each visiting 17 of the schools. However, 21 private companies visited 17 or more schools. Moreover, as shown in table I.2, the private companies making the most frequent campus visits recruited at more schools than the most active federal agencies. In fact, the 20th most active private company visited more schools than the most active federal agencies.

# PLACEMENT OFFICIALS CRITICAL OF COMPLEXITY AND TIMELINESS OF HIRING PROCESS

About a third of the placement officials complained that the federal application process was difficult to understand and took too long to get applicants "in the door."

While one placement official told us that "The process is becoming more streamlined, it is slowly heading in the right direction," his was the only positive comment. In fact, of the 15 placement officials who commented on the hiring process, 14 had critical views.

For some, the hiring process was too complex. As one noted:

"The system is lousy. The way the process is now, there is no way to get direct access to the system. I can pick up the phone and call a private sector company or non-profit organization personnel representative and say, 'Hey, I've got a great candidate for you.' Not so with the federal government."

Another commented, "The process is still very cumbersome. There is a lack of uniformity."

Other placement officials were critical of the length of time it takes to get hired. As one told us, "The time lag in the hiring process is too great. [The government] is losing the interest of the students." Likewise, another stated, "Government jobs are unattractive because of the lengthy process it requires to get hired."

APPENDIX I APPENDIX I

FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT PROCESS
BECOMING MORE UNDERSTANDABLE
TO SOME PLACEMENT OFFICIALS

The placement officials' responses to the questionnaire indicated some improvement in the understandability of the federal employment process on college campuses. As figure I.8 shows, although 24 placement officials said it was neither easier nor more difficult to understand the process, 13 said the process was more understandable in 1990-91. Only three officials said the process had become more difficult to understand.

#### CONCLUSION

The lack of employment information and limited number of recruiting visits we found among the schools we surveyed, if true for the majority of colleges and universities, could put agencies at a disadvantage when they are trying to attract candidates. This point was illustrated by one placement official who warned:

"...federal employment is only one small part of our jobs. The less-than-adequate information flow and the complexity of the application process (as we understand it) makes it very difficult for us to be OPM's--and the [other] agencies'--advocates on campus!"



# University Placement Office Survey April - May 1991

1. Have any federal agencies sent representatives to recruit at your campus during this school year? Please exclude any recruitment visits by military agencies to recruit uniformed personnel. (CHECK ONE.)

(IF NO, ASK:) Have any federal agencies announced plans to recruit at your campus later in this school year (the term ending this spring)? (CHECK ONE.)

- 1. [ 40 ] Made visits
  2. [ 0 ] No visit, plan to visit
  3. [ 0 ] No visit, no plan to visit
  4. [ 0 ] Not sure

  (ASK QUESTION 2.)

  (SKIP TO QUESTION 7.)
- 2. Where have those agencies recruited: at your placement office, at an academic department, or some other place?

  (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.)
  - 1. [ **0** ] At placement office (CONTINUE TO QUESTION 3.)
  - 2. [ 2 ] At an academic department
    3. [ 0 ] Some other place
    4. [ 0 ] Not sure

    (SKIP TO QUESTION 4.)
- 3. How interested or disinterested were graduating seniors in meeting with federal recruiters who visited your placement office this school year...very interested, generally interested, neither interested nor disinterested, generally disinterested, or very disinterested? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.)
  - 1. [ 9 ] Very interested
  - 2. [ 26 ] Generally interested
  - 3. [ 4 ] Neither interested nor disinterested
  - 4. [ 1 ] Generally disinterested
  - 5. [ 0 ] Very disinterested
  - 6. [ 0 ] Not sure

**NOTES** 

- 8. How effective are the recruitment materials provided by OPM and other federal agencies to your office this year compared to last school year: are the materials more effective, about equally effective or less effective? (CHECK ONE.)
  - 1. [ 9 ] More effective
  - 2. [ 25 ] About equally effective
  - 3. [ 2 ] Less effective
  - 4. [ 4 ] Not sure
- 9. How easy or difficult is it for <u>placement officials</u> on your campus to understand how students can obtain federal employment <u>compared to last school year</u> -- is it easier...neither easier nor more difficult...or more difficult? (CHECK ONE.)
  - 1. [ 13 ] Easier
  - 2. [ 24 ] Neither easier nor more difficult
  - 3. [ 3 ] More difficult
  - 4. [ 0 ] Not sure
- 10. To the best of your knowledge, do any private sector companies currently require a written examination to measure the ability of applicants to do the job, as part of the application process? (CHECK ONE.)
  - 1. [ 28 ] Yes (CONTINUE TO QUESTION 11.)
  - 2. [ 11 ] No 3. [ 1 ] Not sure } (SKIP TO QUESTION 12.)
- 11. Which company or companies is that? (RECORD ANSWER.)
- 12. Have you heard or read about the federal Administrative Careers with America (ACWA) exam? (CHECK ONE.)
  - 1. [ 27 ] Yes (CONTINUE TO QUESTION 13.)
  - 2. [ 12 ] No

3. [ 1 ] Not sure

(SKIP TO QUESTION 14.)

APPENDIX IV APPENDIX IV

#### MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS REPORT

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APPENDIX III APPENDIX III

13.	How much information, if any, does your career placement office
	have readily available to students about this ACWA exam: a very
	great deal, a great deal, a moderate amount, some, or little or no
	information? (CHECK ONE.)

1. [ 0 ] A very great deal

2. [ 6] A great deal

3. [ 7] A moderate amount

4. [ 7] Some

5. [ 12 ] Little or no information

6. [ 8 ] Not sure

14. Can you please send me a list of the names of all private organizations and governmental agencies that have conducted recruitment interviews on your campus during this school year? (IF ASKED:) We only need the name of the organization, not the address or a name of a contact person. (CHECK ONE.)

1. [ ] Yes, will send (GIVE NAME/ADDRESS AT GAO.)

2. [ ] No, will not send

Thank you very much for your time.

#### **NOTES**

4. Aside from visits to your placement office, which federal agencies sent representatives to your campus? (RECORD NAMES(S) OF AGENCIES.) NOTES

5. Thinking of <u>all</u> visits to your campus by federal agencies this year: have federal agencies made more visits, about the same number of visits, or fewer visits than last school year?

(CHECK ONE.)

1. [ 5 ] More visits

2. [ 21 ] About the same number of visits

3. [ 13 ] Fewer visits

- 4. [ 1 ] Not sure
- 6. Has the federal Office of Personnel Management (OPM) or any other federal agency provided any recruitment materials to your career placement office this school year? (CHECK ONE.)

1. [ 40 ] Yes (CONTINUE TO QUESTION 7.)

2. [ **0** ] No 3. [ **0** ] Not sure } (SKIP TO QUESTION 9.)

7. How effective or ineffective are those recruitment materials: very effective, generally effective, neither effective nor ineffective, generally ineffective or very ineffective? (CHECK ONE.)

1. [ 4 ] Very effective

2. [ 20 ] Generally effective

3. [ 5 ] Neither effective nor ineffective

4. [ 6 ] Generally ineffective

5. [ 3 ] Very ineffective

6. [ 2 ] Not sure

APPENDIX II APPENDIX II

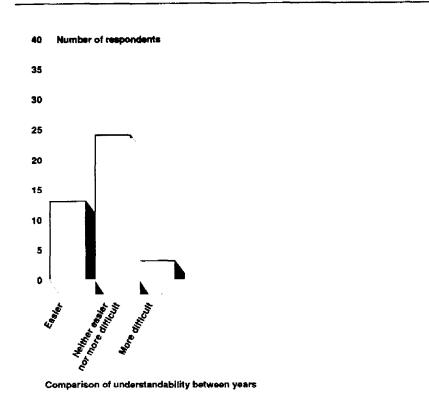
## 40 COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES INCLUDED IN GAO PLACEMENT OFFICE SURVEY

- 1. Appalachian State University
- 2. Ball State University
- 3. Bowling Green State University
- 4. California State University (Long Beach)
- 5. Central Connecticut State University
- 6. Central Michigan University
- 7. Columbia College of Columbia University
- 8. Cornell University
- 9. Eastern Kentucky University
- 10. Ferris State University
- 11. Georgetown University
- 12. Hofstra University
- 13. Marquette University
- 14. Metropolitan State College
- 15. Montclair State College
- 16. New York University
- 17. Northeastern University
- 18. Northern Illinois University
- 19. Ohio University (Athens)
- 20. Portland State University
- 21. Southern Illinois University (Carbondale)
- 22. Texas A & M University
- 23. University of Akron
- 24. University of Arkansas
- 25. University of Georgia
- 26. University of Iowa
- 27. University of Kansas
- 28. University of Louisville
- 29. University of Minnesota (Twin Cities)
- 30. University of Nebraska (Lincoln)
- 31. University of New Mexico (Albuquerque)
- 32. University of San Diego
- 33. University of South Carolina (Columbia)
- University of Southern California (Los Angeles)
- 35. University of Texas (Arlington)
- 36. University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee)
- 37. Virginia Commonwealth University
- 38. Washington State University
- 39. Western Kentucky University
- 40. Youngstown State University

## GAO Conclusion

- Quantity and accessibility of federal job information at colleges and universities may be inadequate.
- Lack of job information could put federal agencies at a disadvantage when trying to attract students.

Figure I.8: Placement Officials' Views on the Understandability of the Federal Employment Process: 1990-91 Compared to 1989-90



n = 40

# GAO Several Placement Officials Critical of Hiring Process

Problems cited by several placement officials were:

- Timeliness of hiring process
- Complexity of hiring process

#### Table I.2: The 20 Most Active Federal and Private Recruiters at 35 Schools

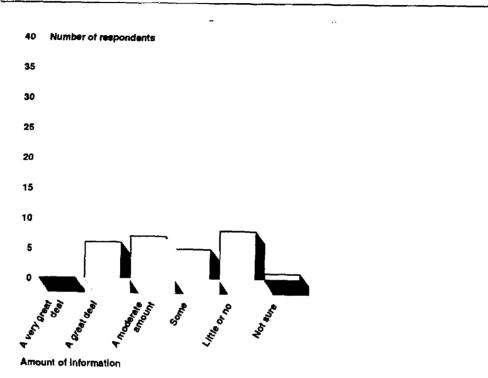
Federal agency	Number of schools visited	Private company	Number of schools visited
Internal Revenue Service	17	Arthur Andersen	34
Central Intelligence Agency	17	Electronic Data Systems	32
	15	Northwestern Mutual	31
Federal Bureau of Investigation	<del></del>		31
Federal Highway Administration	14	Deloitte and Touche	<del></del>
General Accounting Office	13	Coopers and Lybrand	31
Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation	12	KPMG Peat Marwick	30
Comptroller of the Currency	12	Ernst and Young	30
Federal Reserve	11	K-Mart	28
Bureau of Labor Statistics	11	State Farm Insurance	27
NASA	10	Foot Locker/Lady Foot Locker	26
Army Corps of Engineers	9	Prudential	26
National Security Agency	8	Xerox	25
Air Force Civilian Personnel Management Center	8	Price Waterhouse	23
Office of Personnel Management	7	Metropolitan Insurance	22
General Services Administration	7	Sherwin Williams	21
Department of Energy	7	Massachusetts Mutual	21
Defense Contract Audit Agency	6	NCR	20
Naval Ship Weapons Systems Engineering Station	6	General Electric	19
Army and Air Force Exchange Service	6	John Hancock	18
Patent and Trademark Office, Army Materiel Command, Naval Weapons StationSeal Beach <sup>a</sup>	5	Aetna Life and Casualty	18

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>a</sup>These agencies each visited five schools creating a three-way tie for the twentieth position.

Table I.1: Visits to 35 Schools by Federal Agencies

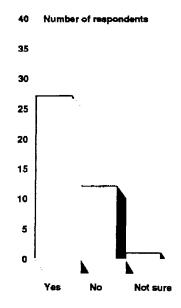
Number of federal agencies	Number of schools visited
2	17
1	15
1	$\frac{14}{14}$
1	13
2	12
2	11
1	10
1	9
2	8
3	7
3	6
3	5
10	4
12	3
18	2
49	1

Figure I.7: Availability of ACWA Information in Placement Offices



n = 27 respondents who had heard or read about the ACWA exams

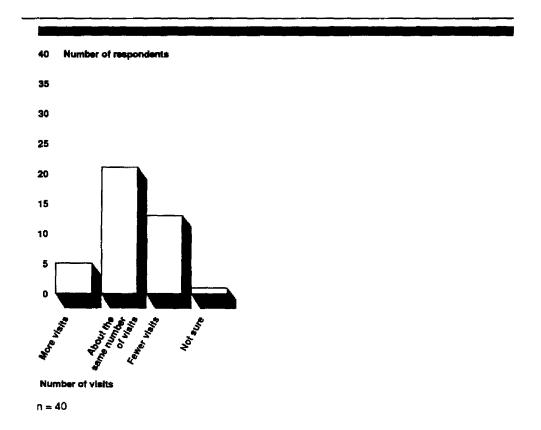
Figure I.6: Placement Officials' Familiarity With ACWA Exams



Have you heard or read about the Administrative Careers With America exam?

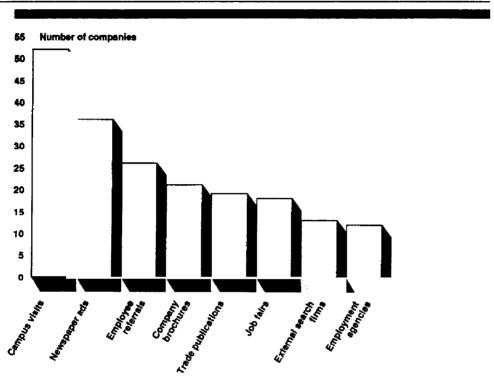
 $n \approx 40$ 

Figure I.5: Federal Recruiting Visits
to 40 Schools in Academic Year 1990-91 Compared to 1989-90



APPENDIX I APPENDIX I

Figure I.4: Large Private Companies Used Campus Visits
More Often Than Other Recruiting Methods



Recruiting method

n = 83 private companies

Figure I.3: Perceptions of Comparative Effectiveness of Federal Recruiting Materials Used in the 1990-91 and 1989-90 Academic Years

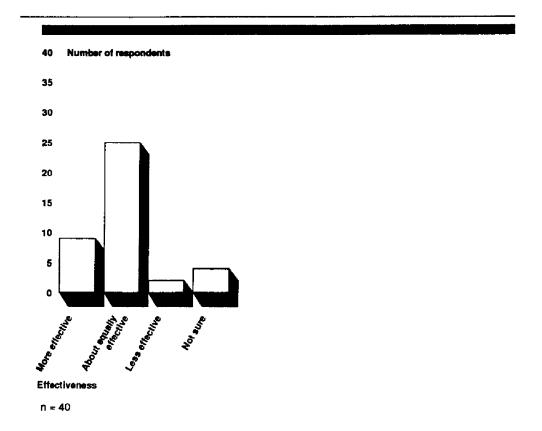
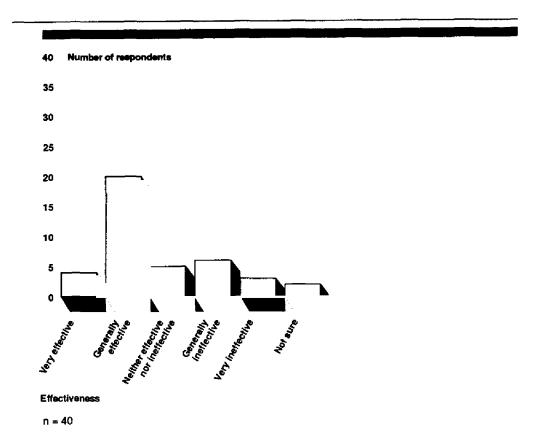
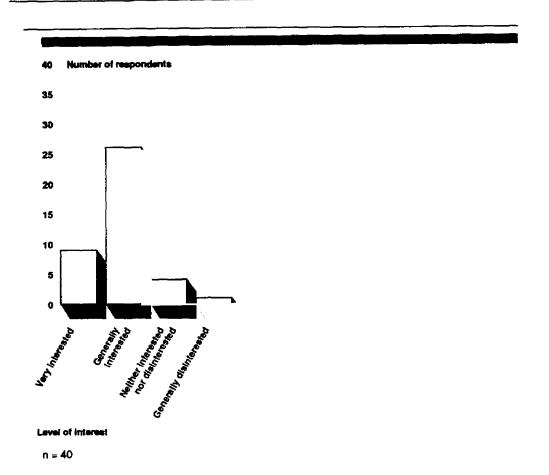


Figure I.2: Perceived Effectiveness of Federal Recruiting Materials



# PLACEMENT OFFICIALS' PERCEPTIONS OF FEDERAL CAMPUS RECRUITING

# Figure I.1: Placement Officials' Views of Student Interest in Meeting With Federal Recruiters



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	ABBREVIATIONS	
ACWA OPM	Administrative Careers With America Office of Personnel Management	

#### B-243207

To compare federal recruiting activities with those of nonfederal organizations, we asked the placement officials to mail us a list of the employers who made recruiting visits to their schools during the 1990-91 academic year. Thirty-five schools responded to this request. For our purposes, multiple visits to a campus (e.q., fall and spring) were counted as a single visit.

We did our audit work from May to August 1991 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards except that we did not verify the accuracy of the lists of employers sent to us by the placement officials. We discussed our findings with OPM officials and included their comments where appropriate.

As arranged with the Subcommittee, we are sending copies of this report to interested parties and will make copies available to others upon request.

The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV. If you have any questions, please call me at (202) 275-6204.

Sincerely yours,

Lordyn S NEuman

Rosslyn S. Kleeman

Director

Federal Workforce Future Issues

#### B-243207

were most effective, there was a clear preference for meeting directly with employers' representatives. One student succinctly captured the students' general feelings when he said, "I want to see real people, find out what they like, what they don't like. I want to be able to evaluate them as to whether they are telling the truth. I can't tell that from a video or literature. I want to see a real person in front of me."

A consistent theme arising from the interviews was that, compared to private firms, the federal presence on college campuses was quite limited. The students told us federal agencies did not do enough campus recruiting and too often relied on students to seek out federal jobs themselves.

To get information on federal campus recruiting in 1991, we did a telephone survey of placement officials in 40 randomly selected colleges and universities at the end of the 1990-91 academic year. Our findings are not generalizable beyond the 40 schools we surveyed.

#### SURVEY RESULTS

Most of the placement officials we surveyed told us their students were interested in learning about federal employment opportunities. Unfortunately, if those students were expecting to meet with a number of recruiters representing the government's diverse agencies, they might have been disappointed. Twenty-one of the 40 officials said the number of campus visits by federal agencies in the 1990-91 academic year was no greater than in 1989-90. Of the others, more than twice as many said the number had decreased rather than increased.

Furthermore, the bulk of the visits were made by a comparatively small number of agencies. Seventeen agencies made about half of all federal campus visits, each going to 7 or more schools.

Additionally, we found that the most active private companies made more campus visits than the most active federal agencies. For example, 21 private companies each visited 17 or more of the schools. Only two federal agencies visited this many schools.

